

***Community-based language learning: A framework for educators.* Joan Clifford & Deborah S. Reisinger, Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press. (2019). 207 pages. ISBN 9781626166363 (paper) \$49.95, ISBN 9781626166356 (hardcover) \$149.95.**

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Language is a tool, perhaps akin to a potent invisible currency humans exchange, that can open doors to meaningful relationships, enable effective interactions in the marketplace of ideas, and facilitate the formation of lasting community partnerships. As language educators consider how best to equip their students to grapple with the many complex aspects of learning a second language, community-based learning may offer a fresh method by which to challenge students to apply theoretical concepts beyond the classroom walls. *Community-Based Language Learning* is a compact handbook intended to prepare language educators for the unique aspects of service-learning their students may encounter in a second language.

The authors explore the purposes of service-learning, defining it and identifying four perspectives that reflect approaches to how it is taught and practiced (p. 12). Of the three components of service-learning relationships—ethical, collaborative, and reciprocal—the authors particularly emphasize their commitment to the latter (p. 13). Although the book’s content seems to align with traditional notions of service-learning and civic engagement, two elements distinguish it. First, it concentrates on unique challenges and opportunities for language learners and the communities with which they may interact. For example, in contrast to traditional service-learning experiences, language students engaged in community-based learning may be particularly reluctant to speak and interact face-to-face based on their insecurities about their language capabilities (p. 2). Speaking in a second language doubtless adds pressure and may engender self-consciousness, particularly as students venture beyond the familiar school setting into the bustle and busyness of new places. Second, the authors contend repeatedly that language should be used as a means for social change (p. 2), consistent with the theme of social justice activism that undergirds the text.

Community-based learning (CBL), is “an umbrella term that provides models of how to engage in curricular and co-curricular experiences with local communities” (p. 5). This includes service-learning and “other solidarity-building practices that transform worldviews, highlight social issues, co-create knowledge, and foster authentic relationships based on connection” (p. 6). In addition, community-based language learning (CBLL) “refers specifically to interactions that take place between [second language] students and heritage/native speakers of the target language residing in the United States” (p. 6). Notably, CBLL offers students “a window onto their own culture, which functions as a mirror” (p. 9). The experiential learning of CBLL is most effective when accompanied by “observation, reflection, and critical thinking” (p. 17).

Student learning outcomes in both CBL and CBLL may include cognitive, social, and emotional development. Reflection exercises may guide instructors in crafting student learning objectives and linking them to specific goals (pp. 34-35). Further, community partners should be an integral part of this process of creating student learning objectives, with educators and partners working to collaboratively design them in a way that is mutually beneficial to students and partners (p. 36). Too often, community partners are omitted from providing feedback, which could be useful to improve evaluation and assessment of the partnerships and the courses (p. 63). Various tools and models may enhance the rigor of student reflection, facilitate classroom discussion, and strengthen learning, including the “DEAL model”—describe, examine, and articulate learning—and similar tools (pp. 70-77). Notably, the literature on community-engaged learning is largely void of material on assessment of and by community partners (p. 94). Accordingly, “interviews, focus groups, and surveys” are potential evaluation measures that may not only improve program performance, but also solidify relationships with community partners (p. 95).

Statistics such as those showing the growing number of homes in the United States in which foreign languages are spoken may be eye-opening for students and educators initiating new and diverse community partnerships (p. 106). Likewise, educators may benefit from considering transformative service-learning, the learning process of “connecting” or learning “to affectively understand and empathize through relationships with community members, peers, and faculty” (p. 129). Anecdotal reports of students experiencing personal epiphanies through CBLL, such as interacting firsthand with immigrants (pp. 130, 136), highlight the value of CBL as a learning methodology. Practical considerations for educators working to establish partnerships for such learning may include safety and appropriate boundaries (pp 136-137), as well as the possible benefits of role play and the explicit review of best practices for students preparing to embark on their learning experience (p. 140).

An important facet of CBLL involves “partnerships,” a key subset of relationships that can be characterized by “closeness, equity, and integrity” (p. 154). Relationship-building must be viewed as central to maximize the positive benefits of service-learning (p. 154). Of note, best and promising practices in solidifying such partnerships may include establishing clarity of the mission, developing a shared vision, and making decisions jointly (p. 156). Such promising practices may also include clear communication, mutually-established principles and processes, and sharing the benefits of the partnership’s accomplishments (pp. 157-158). Partnerships may be categorized as either transactional or transformational—distinguished primarily by their duration and depth—illustrating different levels on which educators may foster and facilitate partnerships (pp. 158-160). In particular, students may find storytelling and interviewing helpful to build and broaden relationships and promote empathy in partnerships (p. 161). On the other hand, students should be encouraged to view CBL with humility such that they are aware of the limited nature of their own contributions in relation to larger issues, chronic conditions, and societal problems (pp. 163-165). Concerning ethics, a recommended practice for educators is to explicitly address with students and partners the role of proper boundaries, permissions, and informed consent (pp. 166-170).

The book may be a useful guide for language educators, especially those unfamiliar with service-learning and CBL. The book’s vocabulary is highbrow, and thus it would likely not appeal to a general readership of students or even scholars interested in civic engagement beyond those who directly teach in the CBLL arena.

Given that the authors identify the book as filling a gap in the literature, it appears to be relatively unique in the field (pp. 1-2). Scattered throughout the book are useful reflection questions for instructors and students, amplifying tables, and illustrative figures, and the book is flanked by five appendices that include sample checklists and learning objectives.

One limitation of the book is its inordinate focus on socio-political activism, which tends to eclipse its points about partnerships and service-learning. In Chapter One alone, for instance, the authors consume twenty-five percent of the pages on politics and critical pedagogy (pp. 20-25). They openly acknowledge their use of “critical theory to argue that languages are a tool for social change” (p. 2). In applying a “critical pedagogy framework” (p. 20), the work is festooned with repetitive invocations of social justice terminology. The index, reflecting the agenda, is replete with terms such as “power,” “privilege,” and “oppression” (pp. 203-204)—while notably silent on character, sacrifice, and responsibility. Yet might not one expect a discussion of “global citizenship,” which the authors ostensibly espouse (p. 1), to contain a more evenhanded, nuanced, and complete discussion? The meta-narrative, it seems, is that CBLL should be used to expose “white privilege” (pp. 111-113), eliminate “structural racism” (p. 9), and vindicate minorities oppressed by the “dominant culture” (p. 7)—by using the classroom as a forum of the “resistance” (p. 23). In the end, identity politics takes center stage, relegating the study of language and service-learning to the wings.

The book may be suitable for language educators, with the caveat that its overt political agenda, rarefied vocabulary, and emphasis on critical pedagogy tend to detract

from the discussion of community-based learning, building effective partnerships, and civic engagement.

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